

KwaZulu-Natal learners beat out the competition in Engen Maths and Science Schools class of 2017

The personal success of the two top learners nationally in the Engen Maths and Science Schools (EMSS) Class of 2017 will be South Africa's gain, as the pair chase their dreams of becoming an actuary and a doctor.

The hard slog was all their own, admit Makyle Naidoo and Nokwenama Gumede, but they attribute their impressive results to the commitment and support of their EMSS teachers, who tirelessly put in the extra effort to take the youngsters from great to exceptional.

Today, Makyle and Nokwenama, both just 17 and flying the flag for KwaZulu-Natal, are at the start of their studies in actuarial science and medicine respectively – proof of the success of the Engen initiative which aims to help address key national skills shortages in engineering and other technical fields.

Makyle, who came first in his matric class at Glenwood High School, took the top spot amongst the 555-strong EMSS class of 2017, followed closely by Nokwenama, a learner at Zwelibanzi High School in Umlazi, who notched up seven distinctions in her seven matric subjects.

The EMSS tutors assist learners at nine different centres across South Africa, offering extra instruction in English, maths and science. Two centres in KwaZulu-Natal and the one in Cape Town all achieved 100% pass rates last year.

Makyle, whose parents divorced when he was a baby, lived with his mother and extended family in Mobeni Heights in Durban before his big move to the University of Cape Town earlier this month.

"It's not always easy when you have six people in the house to find the space and time to study, so I'd often have to lock myself away in a room to work. But my family are all incredibly proud of me today," he says.

He started attending the extra EMSS classes in matric and says they made a phenomenal difference to his marks.

"The teachers were really dedicated to helping us, always going the extra mile and even lending us new textbooks to take home and giving us further extra help when necessary.

"In the final matric maths and science papers particularly, I saw huge benefit because the questions posed were the same kind of questions I'd been exposed to by the EMSS teachers, prompting a different type of thought process," explains Makyle.

For Nokwenama, who has enrolled to study medicine at the Nelson Mandela School of Medicine at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the lessons were a lifeline in a high school with classes of as many as 50 learners, where teachers often struggled to get through the full curriculum.

She attended extra EMSS classes twice a week as she chased her dream of getting the results that would allow her to study to become a doctor.

Since the death of her father two years ago, Nokwenama has shared a four-roomed township house in Umlazi with her mother, aunt and older brother. She jokes that her late nights of studying constantly drew complaints about putting out the lights.

“But they are so proud of me and they fully support my dream. Where I live in Umlazi you see so many parents dying from diseases like Aids and cancer, and leaving their children orphaned. I want to help those parents, and that is why I plan to specialise in those diseases, so I can try to make a real difference,” she says.

The EMSS teachers, adds Nokwenama, helped her by explaining important concepts and filling in the gaps in the syllabus her schoolteachers just could not hope to get to.

“It also helped me tremendously in class because we’d do a chapter in EMSS class before the teacher did it in school. So by then I already had a good understanding and it gave me a chance to really constantly revise what I was learning,” she says.

Nokwenama also spent time in her matric year helping fellow pupils who failed to make it into the EMSS programme.

“That was helpful not only to them, but also to me, because they asked me many questions I’d never even thought of that I could then go and pose to my EMSS teachers.”

The KwaZulu-Natal pair were followed in the top 10 rankings by two learners from the Western Cape, Uri Engelbrecht (3rd) and Zakiyyah Petersen (4th), with Johannesburg’s Esther Shuping taking fifth position amongst EMSS learners who wrote matric in 2017.

“We are so incredibly proud of these learners, who epitomise the quality of the young people we work with around the country every year. Our ultimate reward is to help set them up to pursue stimulating careers that won’t only benefit them personally, but also the economy as a whole,” says Adhila Hamdulay, Engen’s Corporate Social Investment Manager.

The nine EMSS schools across South Africa run classes in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. They provide a high-quality learning experience, including teaching and educational materials, for learners from Grade 10 to 12. Overall, the EMSS matric class of 2017 attained an impressive 94% pass rate.

Engen’s Hamdulay says it is extremely gratifying to hear such positive feedback from KwaZulu-Natal’s top learners.

“We strongly believe that we have a responsibility to help young people realise their full potential, and we feel enormously privileged to have played a role in their impressive achievements,” she says.

To view interviews with EMSS top learners please click on the links below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQ6z5eGoXDA>